

More bones found at Stillwater, more clues to ancient people's culture

By Ann Diggins
Dispatch staff writer

Anan Raymond, archaeologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Stillwater Management Area, said there may be a connection between today's fish die-off and the disappearance of one group of people from the area about 1,000 years ago.

"The marsh was very large and supported a huge population of Indians. Just as the sink is shrinking today, maybe the food resources shrank back then," Raymond told the Fallon Rotary Club's first All-Club luncheon at the Fallon Community Center.

Raymond added in a later telephone interview that the statement was pretty "wild speculation" on his part.

The remains of the people in question were first discovered during the summer of 1985. At that time previously high waters in the marsh began receding. The shrinking water took away topsoil and vegetation and, in its place, left uncovered human skeletons, according to Raymond.

Raymond said the bones represented about 125 individuals which doubles the number of pre-historic bones found in Nevada.

"Archaeologists all over the country are really excited," Raymond said.

Carbon dating tests on the bones have not been finished yet, but Raymond said archaeologists estimate the age of the bones between 5,000 and 1,000 years old.

That estimate was made because of the shape of the arrowheads and other artifacts found with the bones, Raymond said.

"They could have been a people that lived there and moved away before the Paiutes ever arrived," he said. He added they'll know for sure in about nine months.

Other facts that are known so far, Raymond said, are that the people were in fairly good health. The only exception is some of the bones show evidence of a severe form of arthritis in which the tissue between joints rubs away and bones are rubbing together.

"It must have been horribly painful," Raymond said.

The people's teeth, although they showed no sign of decay, were completely worn down, indicating, according to Raymond, a diet with a lot of grit in it. The grit probably came from boiling rocks and grindstones, Raymond said.

The people were also rather large compared to most pre-historic people. Raymond said the males averaged about six feet tall.

"It may have been genetic or from living in the marsh near an abundant food supply," he said.

Raymond also said the artifacts indicated a settled lifestyle. This is also different from most other pre-historic cultures.

Most archaeologists had hypothesized that the pre-historic peoples in this area led nomadic lifestyles, but these people may disprove that theory, Raymond said. That issue is still being studied, however.

"There is every indication that these pre-historic people were not moving around but that they lived off the bounty of the marsh," he said.

Also unusual was that the graves, Raymond said, did not contain a lot of burial goods. On one set of skeletal remains, what used to be a bracelet was found but Raymond said that was very unusual.

The people were, generally, buried in the fetal position, Raymond said. Also interesting, according to Raymond, was that the remains were all facing east, toward Job Peak.

Raymond said the ancient Paiute myths held that Job Peak was sacred because it was the center of the universe and the origin of the Paiute people. He said he wasn't sure if the peak held some significance for the people or if the position was just a coincidence.

Also of possible religious significance, Raymond said, was the placement in each skull of the wing bone of a pelican.

Archaeologists have also found many trash pits, or areas where the people put bones of animals and broken boiling rocks and mortars.

One find that is interesting to biologists is the discovery of minnow river otter bones in these pits. Those species do not live in the marsh today and it may give an indication of the biology of the marsh thousands of years ago, Raymond said.

"It tells us what the environment was like 2,000 years ago and about the evolution of the marsh as an ecosystem," he said.

They have also found a lot of dog bones which Raymond said they hope will lead to a better understanding of the domestication of canines.

Also found was the jaw bone of a particular breed of dog that has not been found in this area before and may suggest the origin of these people, Raymond said.

"The closest resemblance is a wolflike creature in Asia. There may be a tentative connection that the people came from Asia and settled here," he said.

These bones are the first evidence of people existing solely on the marsh, Raymond said. At least that's what the preliminary evidence shows.

"You don't find people in the marsh until 5,000 years ago because it was a big lake," he said.

There is evidence that people were living in the Lahontan Valley as early as 10,000 years ago.

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